

"Do you consider my manner to be unfriendly?" he asked with some degree of hesitation.

"On the contrary," exclaimed Venetia: "I was rejoiced to find that almost from the first moment you entered the room, we began conversing in the most friendly manner together; so that I was actually induced to enter upon an account of all my accomplishments. But I hope you will believe me, Sir Valentine, when I assure you on my honour as a lady," added Venetia seriously, "that it was in the same unaffected artless manner as of a sister talking to a brother."

"Ah!" ejaculated Sir Valentine Malvern, and again did so singular an expression of mingled embarrassment and yet kind interest pass over his countenance that Venetia saw there was something more in his mind than she could comprehend.

"I see," she said, "that you wish to speak to me upon some subject that you nevertheless hesitate to approach;"—then in a still lower tone she added, "Perhaps it is relative to the first time we ever met? You seek an explanation——"

"Do not for a moment fancy that I came hither swayed by any impertinent curiosity," interrupted Valentine.

"You have never mentioned——" began Venetia.

"Never!" rejoined Malvern, instantaneously comprehending what she meant. "I was in St. George's Church when you were married to Lord Sackville—then Mr. Sackville——"

"What! you were there?" exclaimed Venetia, in astonishment.

"Yes: it was however with no specific intention—it was purely accidental. But when I saw you I was struck with amazement. For some weeks or months previously I had heard of Miss Trelawney—every one had heard of Miss Trelawney—and I was astonished on being told in that church and on that occasion that you were Miss Trelawney! Then said I to myself, '*I am mistaken*;' and yet I could not altogether convince myself that I was so. I do not wish to flatter you—very far from that: but I was at a loss to believe at the time that there could be another young lady in the world resembling the Miss Venetia Trelawney whom I saw walk up the aisle of St. George's Church and proceed to the altar on that occasion."

"Well—and you were never led to make inquiries?" asked Lady Sackville.

"No, never," responded Malvern. "I have already told you that I have pertinent curiosity; and besides, temporarily interested in you, the apparent mystery attending you, at the time, I was too much engrossed by my poor father's disappearance to give to that circumstance a prominent place in my memory. But the other night—I was interrupted by my interview with the young lady—*from the very signs you made me perceive that the suspicion which I entertained at St. George's Church after all the correct one, and the young lady passing by the name of Trelawney was really the same I had once before met under such different circumstances.*"

"And now you seek explanations," Venetia quickly.

"No—very far from it," responded Malvern. "I have already assured you that I have no impertinent curiosity; and besides, under ordinary circumstances your affairs would not regard me; I trust that I know the position and duties of a gentleman too well to pry into the secrets of any lady."

"Under ordinary circumstances say?" ejaculated Venetia. "Are there then some extraordinary circumstances?" she inquired, "relative to you and me?"

"Do you not think," asked Malvern, "that I am talking to you in a somewhat familiar strain, despite a certain embarrassment and awkwardness which I just felt, but which is rapidly wearing away as I nearer approach the final revelation? But, I ask, do you not think that I am conversing in a sort of familiar, free, and easy manner? as if there had been between us the intimacy of several years or as if we were cousins, or anything of the kind you like. And yet this is the *third* time I have ever spoken to you in my life: once in Hanover Square, I know when?—the other night in the presence of the Prince—and now."

"But I am not at all offended at your manner," said Venetia. "Perhaps rather encouraged it by my own when I first entered the room."

"You know that I am engaged to be married to Florence Eaton?" Malvern.

"I have heard so," replied Lady Sackville. "But why do you thus start one topic to another?"

"Listen!" continued Malvern: "what I have to say. You have heard that I am going to marry Florence: have you likewise been told that I love her?"

THE
MYSTERIES
OF THE
COURT OF LONDON



BY
George W. M. REYNOLDS

THE SUPERIOR WATCH Co.,

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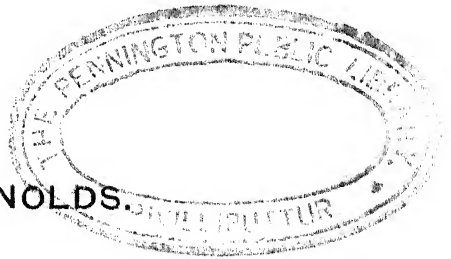
MADRAS

Second Series.

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The Mysteries

OF

The Court of London

VOLUME IX.

CHAPTER CLXVIII.

THE PRIVATE APARTMENTS.

SINCE a very early hour in the morning the Public Executioner been held a captive there: and it is probable that he had already sunk into the stupor of exhaustion, through hunger and thirst the fearful but unavailing struggles he made to extricate himself, were it not a terrible excitement kept all his vital forces in the fullest play. It is however possible to conceive anything in the case of a human countenance more ominous than his features now appeared to

They seemed as if some goading fiend had fastened upon his very heart's core: a fierce and unnatural light, vibrant and reptile-like, shone in his eyes, eating the feverish rage of wild and olivaceous passions: his cheeks, sallow in colour, were sunken and hollow—and all the lower part of his countenance, though long unshaven, had that dark appearance which added to the savage ferocity of his aspect. His hat lay upon the carpet: his coat was matted together with the perspiration that had oozed forth in the desperate but vain efforts he had made to free himself;—and altogether he presented to the view as hideous and revolting a spectacle as ever wore the human shape. He at once recognized the Marquis of Leveson and Lady Sackville. The latter had frequently seen riding in her carriage for he it remembered that although

he had even been in her company once before in this very same suite of rooms.—on the occasion when Sir Douglas Huntingdon had procured his attendance there,—yet Venetia had *then* her veil thickly folded over her face, so that the Hangman had recognised her not. But now—on this present occasion—she had no veil to conceal her features; her bonnet and shawl had been left in the Crimson Drawing Room:—and the Hangman at once perceived that it was none other than the brilliant Lady Sackville who was accompanying the Marquis of Leveson to that suite of rooms to which he would have dared conduct no lady save for the purpose of gallantry and intrigue.

As for Venetia herself, she was at once so amazed—so confounded—on beholding this dreadful man seated captive in one of the chairs, that she had no presence of mind to avert her head, much less to retreat and thus avoid recognition. A similar suspension of all the powers of volition nailed the Marquis to the spot, rendering him unmindful of the fact that the honour of Venetia was suddenly compromised to a fearful extent—and indeed depriving him for the moment of all power to think or act.

But suddenly starting as it were into the keenest consciousness of her position, Venetia gave vent to a cry, and hastily retreating, threw herself upon a sofa in the first room of the suite, and out of sight of the terrible Hangman. At the same moment the Marquis of Leveson recovering

"Well, my dear, I certainly won't stay to vex you: for you have behaved well at last;"—and with these words Mrs. Gale took her departure.

And now, when alone, Venetia flung off her bonnet and shawl, and wringing her hands with ineffable anguish she gave way to the wildest ebullition of grief. No wonder was it that she had retained her veil over her features while the old procuress was still present: for she must have felt that they wore an expression of withering agony—an agony powerful enough, one would almost think, to blight and sear every lineament of that proud and brilliant beauty which had been alike her glory and her shame!

Yes—it was indeed to prevent Mrs. Gale from observing her altered looks that Venetia had continued closely veiled until the woman took her departure: but now giving vent to the full tide of her anguish, she wrung her hands—sobbed bitterly—poured forth floods of tears—and then burying her face in the cushions of the sofa, endeavoured to stifle the sobs and subdue the convulsive gaspings the sounds of which were too distressing even for her own ears.

CHAPTER CLXXIX.

THE SUPPER-DEVOURER.

BUT Venetia was not the only lady of rank and beauty who on this memorable night experienced the lancinating influence of ineffable woe. At the very time that she was compelled to surrender herself to the Marquis of Leveson, this nobleman's niece Lady Ernestina Dysart, was passing through another phase in her own strange and chequered career.

The reader is already aware that Ernestina had been up the whole of the preceding night, and that during all the earlier portion of the day she was engaged at the villa at Blackheath. It was not till the afternoon that she got back to Leveson House; and then, wearied and worn out in body and feeling as if all mental energy had abandoned her for ever, she at once sought her bed-chamber and retired to rest. A profound slumber soon entranced her; and she slept on tranquilly until a late hour in the evening. When she awoke she found a maid-servant seated by the bed-side, and lights burning in the room.

"What o'clock is it?" asked Ernestina. "Half-past nine, my lady," was the response. "His lordship, on hearing that your ladyship had returned and had come up to your room, felt uneasy that you did not descend again: and he accordingly came up to attend upon your ladyship."

"Go and procure me some refreshment," said Ernestina: then suddenly recollecting something, she added, "Give my kindest regards to my uncle—say that I feel indignant—but that if he will step up and see me I should take it as a kindness."

The servant quitted the room; and when Ernestina was again alone she began to deliberate with herself whether she should reveal to her uncle's ears the tremendous outrage she had experienced from Daniel Collin, and explain the fearful nature of the punishment which she was inflicting on that man. She felt the necessity of obtaining her uncle's concurrence in this respect, so as to guard against the possibility of any one entering the secret apartments and effecting the liberation of the intended victim. But would her uncle become a party to the infliction of that frightful vengeance?—would he make himself an accomplice in the tremendous process of thus killing a human being by inches within the walls of that house? That was the question. But still when Ernestina passed in review all the arguments for or against the probable result she came to the conclusion that her uncle would assist her in avenging so terrible an outrage and leaving the Hangman to his fate. Indeed, it would be impossible to permit so desperate a man to go forth into the world again as her implacable and unrelenting enemy.

Such were Ernestina's reflections during the maid-servant's temporary absence from the room; and the result was a determination to tell her uncle everything. But when the domestics reappeared, bearing a tray containing refreshments, Ernestina was informed that the Marquis of Leveson had gone out suddenly and unexpectedly at about seven o'clock and had not yet returned.

The real truth was that the faithful valet Brockman, knowing his lordship to be engaged in the Crimson Drawing Room or elsewhere, with a lady, had purposely informed the maidservant that he had gone out; and hence the message now delivered by this female dependant to Ernestina.

"In that case," said her ladyship, "I will defer seeing my uncle till the morning. You may now retire: and I shall not see you any more this night."

When again alone, Ernestina began to reflect that after all it was perhaps much better her uncle was not at home. If he were, he might have objected to become an accomplice in the infliction of a slow, lingering, and terrible death upon Coffin;—he might have insisted on liberating the wretch at all hazards and at any risks.

"But since he has gone out," thought Ernestina, continuing her musings as she sat up in bed to partake of the refreshments which had been brought, "it is most likely he will spend the entire evening away from home, and not return till a late hour. That he will visit his private suite of apartments to-night is therefore by no means probable; and when tomorrow comes it is to be hoped that the agonies of thirst, the pangs of hunger, and the exhausting efforts of maddened attempts to escape, will have consummated the work of death. But when once the deed is done and the wretch shall be no more, my uncle *must* adopt some means to dispose of the corpse. It will be too late *then* for him to refuse to assent to the act or become an accessory to its perpetration; and the only thing for him to consider will be the best means of making away with all evidences of the occurrence."

In this strain did Ernestina continue to weigh the results of her vengeance in respect to the Hangman; and gradually the desire began to arise in her mind to satisfy herself that this vengeance was proceeding according to her hopes and expectations. Perhaps the object of her inveterate hatred was already dead? Who could tell how long or how short a period it might take to send a man out of existence by such a process as that? It was not so much the hunger and thirst: those she knew full well, might be endured for days and days: but it was the terrible nature of the captivity—the strange and horrible restriction of the person—the fearful crampings of all the limbs—and the wearing, tearing, heart-breaking efforts which a strong man was sure to make in his utter desperation to release himself,—these constituted the exhausting powers that should lead to speedy dissolution! Likely enough then, did she deem it, that he had already ceased to exist; and the frightful outrage she had experienced made her feel a ferocious desire to gratify her vindictive rage with a view of the cold inanimate corpse of him who had so terribly abused her. Yes—and for the same reason too, if he were not yet dead, did her revengeful hate prompt her to go and feast

her eyes upon the excruciations, the agonies, and the tortures which the wretch must be suffering!

Thus, in either case—whether he were dead or alive—did the implacability and dark ferocity of her revenge urge her to pay a visit to the room where she had left her victim. Yielding to the influence of this morbid feeling, Lady Ernestina Dysart rose from the couch, and began to put on some of her clothing. She felt refreshed by the hours of tranquil slumber which she had enjoyed, and invigorated by the food and wine of which she had just partaken. Well fitted, then, was she for the proceedings which she proposed to undertake: but the state of her mind was very far removed from aught at all bordering upon happiness. True, she was released from the one tremendous source of alarm that for a year past had ever been menacingly imminent: namely, the tragedy of the bath-room at the Blackheath villa. But though thus relieved from a sense of danger on that head, was she not now crushed as it were by the consciousness of so awful a degradation that, depraved and unprincipled though she were, it was impossible for her to remain callous to *that*? No—she indeed felt that she was polluted beyond all purification—that she was as loathsome an object in her own esteem as if she had been dragged through the ordeal of all the lowest stews and filthiest brothels with which the metropolis abounds: and if the thought of her beauty now arose in her mind, it was only to make her shudder at the revolting recollection that every charm had been in the possession of the common hangman. Awful and hideous recollection!—astounding idea!—crucifying thought!—enough to stun her senses with dismay, or else goad them to a rabid frenzy!

She was in the midst of resuming her apparel, when her ear suddenly caught the sound of some one turning the handle of the door; and she fancied that the maid was coming back, probably to say that the Marquis of Leveson had returned. But quickly did the door open—a form passed as rapidly in—and as the door closed again and the key turned in the lock, a horrible groan came from Ernestina's tongue, and she sank down upon her knees in the presence of the Hangman!

"Ah! the tables are turned now," he said, in a tone of diabolic ferocity, while his hideous countenance glared upon the unhappy woman as if every lineament were menacing of murder.]

"O God!" she said, clasping her hands in utter despair, and feeling as if the cold hands of death were already upon her.

"Ah! food—wine!" ejaculated the Hangman, suddenly catching sight of the tray upon a table close by the bed. "Just what I want!"—and he was bounding with the rabid eagerness of famine towards the refreshments, when, swift as the startled deer, Ernestina sprang from her knees: swept towards the mantel, and seized the bell-rope.

But at that very instant the Hangman turned and grasped her wrist with such fearful violence that she shrieked out with the pain. Another second, and he would have been too late to prevent her from making the bell ring.

"Silence, and sit down!" he said, with tone and looks of an infernal ferocity; then having flung her as it were into a chair, he took the towels from the wash-hand stand and bound her in such a way that she could not raise from the seat.

Ernestina struggled not, and spoke not a word. A fearful terror was upon her. She saw that the man was half maddened and capable of any deed of violence—even murder itself; and polluted, degraded, lost even in her own estimation as she was, yet when thus at any moment her death-blow might be dealt, the instinctive clings to life asserted their power.

"Now you will stay there as long as I like," said the Hangman, speaking with a hyena-like ferocity. "But if you make any noise, *this* will soon silence you!"—and as he spoke he drew forth his sharp clasp knife, the blade of which had a horrible ghastly appearance that caused the blood to stagnate throughout the unhappy woman's entire being.

Daniel Coffin now sat down at the table, and began to eat and drink with the avidity of a wild beast. The maid-servant had placed several dishes upon the tray in order to tempt Lady Ernestina's appetite—cold chicken, tongue, pigeon-pie, and jellies, together with sherry and Port-wine. As a supper there would have been sufficient for six or eight persons; but almost incredible was the inroad which Daniel Coffin made upon the viands. Dish after dish did he attack with the ravenous appetite of one who had been starving for whole days. The cold fowl was picked to the very bones: and even some of these did he crunch and swallow during the devouring process. Of the tongue which was nearly entire when he thrust his fork into it, did he leave but a few pieces of the fat and tough portions of the root; and

as for the pigeon-pie, it disappeared proportionate rapidity. This troc supper he washed down with that which he drank out of a tumbler, if it were more water or malt liquor thus poured down his capacious throat, and the repast was wound up with jellies, all of which he disposed of in a dozen twinklings of the eye.

While the Hangman was engaged in his monster repast, Lady Ernestina, endeavouring to collect her ideas and alter her position in the face. But she could not do so easily and deliberately was impossible for her to retain calmness in the presence of this calamity which had overtaken her. Indeed were the tables now! Then the Hangman—her master—having power of life and death over her, as was she bound captive and helpless in that chair. What could he do with her? What course did he mean to adopt? The horrors would the implacability of his vengeance suggest? In a word what would be her fate? She knew not:—and in the midst of those ice-like shuddering freezing tremors which passed over her could she possibly settle her thoughts as to frame a conjecture upon the subject?

"There! that will do for once," said the Hangman, pushing away his plate, then as he poured the remains of the wine into the tumbler and surveyed with grim complacency the various dishes had emptied, he observed, "This at least is certainly a trifle of compensation upwards of twenty hours' captivity in that cursed chair: and considering I hadn't eaten anything since nine o'clock last evening, my fast may be reckoned at least twenty-five hours."

He then poured the remainder of the wine down his throat: and after smacking his lips, fixed his eyes upon Ernestina.

"Well, and what do you think of yourself now," he continued, "after playing me such a pretty trick? By Jove! enough to make one stark-staring mad to think of it. But how do you suppose I loose?" he demanded with an ironical grin. "The vices of you aristocrats are often not for me to crack somehow or another. Tell the truth, I had pretty well given up all hope, when, lo and behold! the door opens—a light shines in—and who should make their appearance but your precious uncle and Lady Sackville."

"Ah!" ejaculated Ernestina, amazed for the moment rising above her terror. "My uncle and Venetia?"

"Aye, that it was," exclaimed the Hangman, with a grim smile. "What scandalous reprobates you women of quality are to be sure! However, a capital thing it was for me that this should have happened to-night: for I do believe I should have been dead before morning. Now, so far from dying or any chance of it, I am in the best possible feather—two hundred pounds in my pocket—a good supper and a couple of bottles of wine under my waistcoat—and one of the handsomest women of the Aristocracy for my mistress."

"Ernestina gave a sudden start and a faint cry as these last words, so full of terrible menace, smote her ears: but feeling the next instant how utterly powerless she was, she sank back in the chair with a low deep moan, and her head fell forward upon the luxuriant volume of her naked bosom.

"It's above an hour and a half ago that I was let loose from that cursed chair," resumed the Hangman; "and I meant to come straight up to this room at once, but I heard some one about on the stairs—so I just slipped into another chamber—the first that was handy—and locking myself in, laid down on the bed a bit, for I was regularly tired out. However, when I had done my nap, I found my way to your room, and here I am safe and sound. But I suppose," he added, with another grin and ironical leer, "you can't guess why I am sitting here chattering to you in this familiar style? In the first place it's because this wine has put me into a little better humour than I was just now; and in the second place because you are my mistress, and so I want to put ourselves on an intimate and comfortable footing together."

Ernestina's countenance grew haggard and ghastly to a degree as the Public Executioner thus spoke; and as she raised her eyes in mingled entreaty, horror, and uncertainty towards him, all the intensity of her varied feelings was depicted with a frightful eloquence in her looks.

"Well, and what are you thinking of, then!" he demanded with brutal abruptness. "You must not give way to regret and so on, or else it will spoil your beauty. And mind, yours is a beauty of which I shall be very proud when I introduce you to all my particular friends."

"Eternal God!" shrieked Lady Ernestina, suddenly shaking herself in a paroxysm of hysterical frenzy: "is it possible that all this can be true—that I hear aright?"

"True? of course it is! Why the devil shouldn't it be? But come—I will give you a proof of my love and affection."

Thus speaking, and with a horrible chuckling laugh, the Hangman, who was somewhat under the influence of the two bottles of wine which he had drunk, rose from his chair—accosted Ernestina—and stooping down, began covering her face with kisses. She struggled—O heavens! she struggled as if it were a huge boaconstrictor that was thus slobbering her with its forked tongue previous to the process of deglutition: but she was so bound in the chair and her arms were secured in such a manner that she could afford no effectual resistance; and as to screaming out, her powers of utterance were either absorbed in the horror of her feelings, or else the few stifled cries which might perhaps have found vent were kept down by the brutal kisses of the monster.

"Now, don't you think I am an affectionate kind of fellow?" he asked. "But come—it's time we should be off:"—and with these words he loosened the towels which held her ladyship in the chair.

Panting and gasping from the half smothering effects of the caresses he had bestowed upon her, and with a deep inward sense of self-loathing—wretched too, O wretched beyond all possibility of description—Ernestina had scarcely consciousness or energy left to think at all. But when the ruffian bade her rise, with an intimation that she was to depart in his company, she looked up into his face in a manner of anxious inquiry.

"Well, I suppose I spoke intelligibly enough," he growlingly observed: "and if not, I can soon make you understand. You are going away with me to be my mistress—to live with me—no, not, exactly to live with me 'cause why, it wouldn't do to take you to the same house where Sally Melmoth is. But I will put you into a nice comfortable lodging over in Bermondsey——"

"Monster—wretch—villain!" exclaimed Ernestina, now starting from the chair to which she was no longer bound: "let this scene end at once!"

"Well then, it will end in this manner," cried the Hangman, snatching up his clasp-knife from the table and raising the ghastly gleaming blade above Ernestina's head.

"Mercy, mercy!" she ejaculated, falling upon her knees: for there was something frightful in the aspect of that hideous knife.

THE MYSTERIES

"Now listen, while I say just a few last words," exclaimed Coffin.

"Last words?" repeated Ernestina trembling all over as she knelt before him: for it struck her that this phrase was indicative of her doom.

"You are a fool—I don't want to hurt you, unless you make me," resumed the Hangman. "But what I mean to say is just simply this. Twice have you done your best to make an end of me—once when you thought you was sticking a dagger into me on Westminster Bridge; and last night, or rather this morning, when you shoved me into the chair. If I didn't mean to be revenged, I shouldn't be flesh and blood. But I *do* mean revenge—and that is by making you my mistress. Or else I will send every inch of this blade through that lovely bosom of yours, down into your very heart. So now decide."

Ernestina remained upon her knees, but with her hands no longer outstretched nor her looks upraised. Her arms fell before her, and her head drooped on her bosom, giving her the air of a kneeling penitent. She was abandoning herself to despair: the stupor of dismay was coming over her;—her ideas were growing confused—her senses seemed to be leaving her.

"Now then, get up—dress yourself—and let us depart," said the Hangman.

But no response was given him—and the unhappy lady, already upon her knees, fell with her face downward upon the floor, where she lay senseless.

When she awoke to consciousness again, she was lying on the bed, and the Hangman was sprinkling water on her face. A conviction that she had experienced fresh outrage struck her as if with a death-blow!

"You are killing me—I am dying!" she murmured in a faint voice: but still was there an expression of ineffable horror in her looks as she averted them from the Hangman's countenance.

"Oh! that's all nonsense," he exclaimed, "Women don't die like this. Besides, you are young, and strong, and healthy enough. If it was the Prince that was with you, you wouldn't be dying with anything unless it was pleasure: but because a gentleman of my profession has took a fancy to you——"

"Oh! if you have any compassion left—if you have any feeling in your heart," moaned the wretched Ernestina, "leave me—I am dying!"

The Hangman grew frightened. Even while Ernestina was giving faint and feeble utterance to those last words, he was

struck by the visible change which he came over her; and there was also something that alarmed him in the tone of her voice. Yet he was undecided how to act. To leave her then and there, was to abandon the vengeance which he had resolved to wreak: and how could he give up all idea of revenge for what he considered to be the wrongs he had experienced? That he was already sufficiently avenged by the brutal outrages perpetrated on the unhappy lady, he did not think. If sought to drag her through all the mire, pollution, and filth of a brothel in Bermondsey: for it was only by the consummate degradation that the high-born, titled and beautiful lady that his fiendish malice and diabolic vindictiveness could be appeased.

While he was standing by the side of the couch, uncertain how to act, Ernestina, had averted her countenance; and shading her eyes with one of her white hands, she lay as if in extremities—her breath coming with quick uneasy gaspings, and all the lower part of her countenance looking as if the seal of death were already impressed upon it.

"Come now, what does this mean?" demanded the Hangman gruffly, endeavouring as it were to conceal his fears even from himself beneath a display of his savage temper. "What's the matter with you?"

"I tell you I am dying," answered Ernestina in a voice that was scarcely audible. "Heaven! will you not suffer me to die in peace?"

Daniel Coffin was now too seriously alarmed to permit him to remain undecided any longer; and thinking that the best course he could adopt would be to take his departure as promptly as possible, he without another word snatched up his hat, flung it upon his head, and stole forth from the room. Descending the stairs, he boldly traversed the hall; and the moment the porter emerged from his great leathern sentry-box in which he was wont to sit and doze, Coffin said, "I'm a friend of Mr. Brockman's."

The porter recollected having seen the Hangman before, but still he could not help gazing suspiciously upon him. Coffin accordingly drew the crow-bar out of his pocket, and gave the domestic a tap on the head which at once stretched him senseless on the marble floor of the hall.

The Hangman escaped from the house without any farther molestation: and several minutes elapsed before the hall-porter came to himself. He then raised

an alarm that some robber had been in the house; and as the servants rushed about in all directions, the maid appointed to wait on Ernestina sped to her room. There she found her ladyship dangerously ill: but nothing could equal the young woman's amazement when she beheld the dishes completely cleared and the decanters emptied.

"Heavens! the robbers have been here!" she exclaimed in surprise and alarm.

Lady Ernestina Dysart, now recovering partially, and perceiving the necessity of telling some tale, at once corroborated the maid's belief—representing that she had fallen into a swoon on discovering a robber in her room, and, that she was only now beginning to shake off the effects of the terrific fright she had sustained.

In this manner was not only the absence of the supper accounted for, but likewise the serious illness which Lady Ernestina experienced.

CHAPTER CLXXX.

CONCLUSION OF THE HISTORY OF SELLIS.

THE scene shifts once more to Windsor Castle; and it is the same evening of which we have been writing.

The reader will not have forgotten a certain Mrs. Bredalbane, occupying the post of one of the Royal Bed-chamber Women: and if we peep into this lady's own room in the castellated palace, at about ten o'clock, we shall find her seated *tete-a-tete* with Mrs. Arbuthnot, who held a similar appointment. These two ladies had become great friends and confidants; and when not required to be in personal attendance on the Queen, they were wont to have a cup of tea or a pleasant little supper together in order to discuss all the scandal of the palace.

On the present occasion they were seated at the supper-table. The repast was over: but they were enjoying themselves with a glass of *liqueur*, while indulging in some of their favourite topics of discourse.

"Yes, my dear friend," said Mrs. Bredalbane, pursuing the thread of some previous remarks which she had been making, "I can assure you the Princess persecutes me to death upon this subject: and that is what you beheld her talking to me so earnestly about in the Park this morning."

"But how is it," inquired Mrs. Arbuthnot, "that her Royal Highness should be so anxious to learn the history of Sellis's mysterious death?"

"You might say *murder* if you chose!" observed Mrs. Bredalbane.

"Indeed! are you so positive on that head?" exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"I am," was the response. "Of all the topics whereon you and I have so frequently conversed, I do believe that the Sellis business is the only one left untouched by us——"

"And it is precisely that which has suddenly assumed an important degree of interest in my eyes," interrupted Mrs. Arbuthnot, "after what you have told me relative to the young Princess Charlotte. But how came her Royal Highness to be aware that you, of all the ladies at Court, were better instructed in this mysterious transaction than any one else?"

"I will tell you how it happened," said Mrs. Bredalbane. "Poor dear Lady Prescott, whose melancholy death at Geneva has so recently appeared in the papers, was a bosom friend of mine; and one evening we were talking familiarly together, in the same way as you and I at the present moment. The conversation turned upon the Sellis affair; and I was induced to commence the narrative of the dread occurrence. Little suspecting who overheard me, I had nearly finished the recital, when all of a sudden the astounding fact became revealed to us that the Princess Charlotte was a listener; and, as she subsequently confessed, she had caught every syllable—that is to say, as far as I had advanced in the narrative."

"Dear me, how very awkward!" exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Was that long ago?"

"Yes—some months—just before Lady Prescott resigned and was succeeded by you. From that moment has the Princess constantly plagued and persecuted me to tell her the remainder of the narrative: but it is of a nature which, strictly speaking, cannot possibly be revealed to so young a person."

"Is it then of so very peculiar a character?" asked Mrs. Arbuthnot, with a display of curiosity that was significant enough.

"Ah! my dear friend, if you only heard it," exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane, "you would indeed agree with me that I cannot—must not—dare not comply with the young Princess's request. I have accordingly managed to put her off from time to time with a variety of excuses; but this

What then is to be done? I assuredly do not ever wish to be dragged into a revelation, nor yet be surprised into a betrayal, of this tremendous secret. My only course is to leave St. James's—to seek some other service: and by being thus removed from the presence of those whom this secret so nearly concerns, I may not be forced every day, and every hour, to find myself blushing or turning pale, and having to invent some falsehood as an excuse for my emotions.

"My mind therefore is made up. I shall leave to-morrow. My child's illness will serve as an excuse: the doctor said something to-day about the seaside. This then will serve to account for my sudden resolve—a resolve which is now unchangeable.

"If I write to you thus, addressing you by no name—it is that I cannot bring myself to pay even the most ordinary courtesy to one who

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Here the letter abruptly broke off: but it was evident that, so much as there was of it, its contents had produced a deep impression upon Mrs. Arbuthnot's mind.

"What think you of that document?" asked Mrs. Bredalbane.

"Before I offer a single comment," responded Mrs. Arbuthnot, "be pleased to finish your narrative:"—and as she thus spoke, her manner was grave and her look serious to a degree.

"I have but little more to say," continued the Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane. "You may readily suppose that Joux, on perusing this letter, was strangely excited; and it on the spur of the moment he had deemed it prudent to abstain from declaring what he knew or producing the document, he was now more than ever confirmed in the adoption of that course. The inquest took place; and as a matter of course the evidence, such as it was, had been cooked up so as to have but one tendency—namely, to fix the stigma of self-destruction upon Sellis. A verdict was returned accordingly; and the unfortunate Italian was not only branded as a base, cowardly assassin—the midnight assailant of a kind and benevolent master—but also as a miserable suicide!"

"And what about Joux?" asked Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"He managed to keep himself out of the way at the moment when the evidence of the domestics and others was being taken down in writing to be ultimately submitted to the Coroner's jury: and soon afterwards

he quitted the service of his Royal Highness. He then entered my household as butler, my husband being at that time alive and our residence in Mount Street. In the course of a short time I observed that Joux had evidently something on his mind: and knowing of course that he had been in the service of the Duke of Cumberland, I fancied that he might have picked up some piece of Court scandal, or have become a party in some not over-nice transaction connected with high life. To these suppositions I was led by a word or two which at times he inadvertently dropped; and at length I pressed him on the subject. He then told me all these particulars relative to Sellis and the letter, which I have been describing to you, and which have never been made public. He gave me that letter: he even appeared delighted to get rid of it; and yet he assured me that some superstitious feeling had always prevented him from destroying it whenever he entertained the idea. He left me at length to 'better himself' as the phrase goes: and I know not what has become of him."

"But what was *his* opinion, relative to the whole affair?" asked Mrs. Arbuthnot, fixing upon her friend a keen and searching look.

"What could he think otherwise than that Sellis had discovered an amorous intrigue existing between the Princess Augusta and the valet Neale; and that fearful of being betrayed and ruined, Neale murdered Sellis, and then in order to shield himself, penetrated into the Duke of Cumberland's room—wounded his Royal Highness—and fled—of course leaving it to be supposed that Sellis was the assailant."

"And you believe all this relative to Neale?" asked Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"To be sure I do," replied Mrs. Bredalbane. "Surely you do not fancy that Joux forged this letter, and that his whole story being a fiction. Sellis was really an intended robber and murderer, and an actual suicide?"

"No—I believe every syllable of the story told by Joux," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot. "I also feel convinced that this letter is genuine, though without signature, imperfect, and unfinished. I therefore believe that Sellis was murdered but I do *not* believe that Neale was the murderer!"

"Good heavens! what *do* you believe?" exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane, with a frightened regard.

"Tell me what was the impression that Joux entertained on the subject?" inquired Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"I do not remember that he ever specifically and in so many words explained his opinion," said Mrs. Bredalbano. "He told me the narrative—gave me the letter—and suffered me to draw my own inference; which I did, supposing it to be the same that he himself had already deduced from the facts themselves."

"Depend upon it," observed Mrs. Arbuthnot, shaking her head solemnly, "that the impression Joux formed was very different from the one which you, my dear friend, received."

"Good heavens! I begin to entertain a dreadful suspicion," cried Mrs. Bredalbano.

"And my wonder is that you did not entertain it long ago," rejoined Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Look calmly and dispassionately at all the facts. Why was Joux so overpowered with alarm on discovering the secret? Because he read the frightful truth in a moment! Had he believed Neale—a humble and obscure domestic—to have been the murderer, he would not have feared to proclaim this belief. But it was because he comprehended the whole of that awful mystery——"

"For God's sake, take care of what you say!" interrupted Mrs. Bredalbano, casting an anxious glance around as if the faces of listeners might peer forth from the very walls: then she rose and looked forth from the door to satisfy herself that there were no eaves-droppers.

"It is impossible," continued Mrs. Arbuthnot when Mrs. Bredalbano had resumed her seat, "to shut one's eyes against the truth—startling, horrifying, and astounding though it be—which stands forth patent and visible from amidst all the facts before us. The belief that Neale was the murderer involves the clumsiest theory. How could he be ruined and undone because a Royal lady bestowed her favours on him. Would she not screen him? would she not provide for him! Where was the necessity to murder Sellis? Think you that the Princess herself would have counselled him to the deed? And then, if your theory makes him the murderer of Sellis, it must make him also the assailant of the Duke. But why suppose him committing one unnecessary crime in order to veil another? It would have been an act of sheer madness on Neale's part; and the theory is not tenable for a moment."

"Then who—who?" asked Mrs. Bredalbano, scarcely daring to allow her lips to

form the query which all her suspicions now naturally suggested.

"My dear friend, between you and me," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, "there is not the slightest necessity to mince matters. We are alone—we shall not betray each other—and we may therefore speak without reserve. This then is my opinion—my firm opinion—the opinion—to which I came while reading Sellis's letter——"

"And that opinion?" asked Mrs. Bredalbano.

"Is that Ernest Duke of Cumberland was guilty of incest with his sister the Princess Augusta, and was himself the murderer of Sellis!"

Such was the answer that Mrs. Arbuthnot gave in a firm and solemn voice: and then a long pause ensued.

"Yes—it must be so," said Mrs. Bredalbano, at length breaking silence and speaking in a musing tone. I comprehend it all now! That letter was intended to have been sent to the Duke of Cumberland; whereas until this night I have always imagined that it was meant for Neale. Poor Sellis! he must have been endowed with fine and even noble feelings indeed. That such was the case his letter fully proves!"

"And in imagination," continued Mrs. Arbuthnot, "one may penetrate into the solitude of his chamber on that fearful night! I fancy that I can see him, carried along by a torrent of irresistible feelings excited by the fearful crime of incest which he had witnessed, taking up his pen to give expression to those feelings in a letter to his Royal master—that master whom he evidently considered to have forfeited all claim to respect and deference! Then may we imagine him throwing down his pen—perhaps even tossing the paper itself impatiently aside, so that it fell down in the corner where Joux picked it up—and throwing himself, half dressed as he was, upon the bed, exhausted by the fearful excitement of his overwrought feelings. But ah! now comes the awful phase of the tremendous drama! The door opens—the Duke of Cumberland steals in—Sellis sleeps—and from that sleep there is to be no waking. The frightful deed is done; and forth from that room goes the Duke—a murderer! Aye, and what is more too, he must have been a cold-blooded assassin; for on his return to his own room, he had the presence of mind to perform the part which was to give a colour and complexion to the whole affair—I mean those wounds which he must have inflicted upon himself——"

"But the Medical evidence," interrupted Mrs. Bredalbane "proved that the wounds were serious."

"Granting that they were," rejoined Mrs. Arbuthnot, "may we not suppose that the Duke inflicted them a little more severely than he perhaps intended?—or that being a bold and desperate man, he calculated full well that the more severely he punished himself the more certain was he to avert suspicion from his own door? Or again, the medical evidence may have been exaggerated and overstrained."

"Is it not an awful subject?" asked Mrs. Bredalbane, as she replaced the unfinished letter of the murdered Sellis in her writing-desk.

"It is a tremendous and a fearful episode in the history of the Royal Family," replied Mrs. Arbuthnot: "and I think that you now will be more than ever cautious how you appease the curiosity of the Prince Charlotte."

CHAPTER CLXXXI.

THE DOOMED WOMAN

RETURN we once more to Geneva, the scene of so many and startling incidents already chronicled in our narrative.

It was ten o'clock at night, when Jocelyn Loftus rang the bell at the entrance of the gloomy prison. The gate was immediately opened by the porter, who inquired his business.

"I wish to see the English woman named Ranger, who is to die to-morrow," was the answer given by our hero.

"It is too late, sir," replied the porter. "The prison hours —"

"Here!" said Loftus, producing a paper from his pocket. "It is an order from the Syndics to admit me."

The man glanced his eye over the paper, bowed with much respect, and said, "Have the kindness, sir, to follow me."

Thus speaking, the porter conducted our hero along the gloomy passage, which was dimly lighted by an iron lamp suspended to the ceiling: and turning into another stone corridor he led him into a large room, where a turnkey, two or three of the prison watchmen and the serjeant of the guard stationed within the walls of the establishment, were lounging upon benches, smoking their pipes and drinking the small wine of the country. The porter gave the written order to the turnkey, who forthwith took a

lantern and requested Jocelyn to accompany him. The porter returned to his lodge the gate, and our hero followed the turnkey through the apartment into another long passage on the farther side. They then traversed a large courtyard surrounded by the lofty building constituting that particular division of the gaol. But in one window only did a light shine.

"That is where the three men are who are to be guillotined to-morrow along with Mrs. Ranger," said the turnkey. "The priest is with them—for they are three Catholics; and they are allowed a light in their cell."

"And how do they bear themselves?" asked Loftus: "for I was told yesterday that they are thoroughly reckless and impenitent."

"There!" said the turnkey: "that is a proof!"—"and he drew Jocelyn beneath the barred window of the cell, where they both paused for a few moments.

The three men were singing—not a hymn, but a bacchanalian song; and then suddenly breaking off with a loud laugh they began flinging taunts and ribald jests at the priest. Then arose however the voice of that pious man enjoining them to listen to the words he had to speak; but again they broke forth into a coarse guffaw; and Jocelyn, with a cold tremor passing throughout his frame, whispered to the turnkey, "This is horrible! for heaven's sake let us move on."

"Think you," asked the prison functionary, as he proceeded to conduct our hero across the yard, "that those men will continue thus until the last? I do not. My experience is against such a belief."

"And I also think," answered Jocelyn—"and indeed I hope for their own sake, that there was something false, hollow, and unnatural in their dreadful mirth. It sounded like the desperate attempt of men to drown care in a forced excitement.

"Just so," rejoined the turnkey. "But here we are in the women's division."

While thus speaking, the prison-official had opened a door leading into a second courtyard; and here also one light was alone seen shining through the window of a cell on the ground-floor. The turnkey opened another door, which led into the building; and conducting our hero along a gloomy passage, where their footsteps raised echoes that had a fearful and ominous sound, he presently stopped at a door through the chinks of which a feeble glimmering shone forth.

"Do you wish to see her alone?" he asked, in a subdued whisper. "Just as you like."

"Yes—alone," replied Loftus. "Is any one with her?"

"No: she desired the clergyman—for she has a Protestant minister attending upon her—to return at midnight. I shall walk up and down in the passage until you come forth again."

Thus speaking, he drew back the bolts and unfastened the chain of the massive door: the key grated horribly in the lock—and the next moment Jocelyn passed into the cell. The door closed behind him; and he was now alone with Mrs. Ranger.

She was sitting upon the mean and sordid pallet stretched on a rough wooden bedstead: a candle stood upon a small table; and its light, dim and flickering, added to the ghastliness of the wretched woman's appearance. Heavens! how altered was she. The ravages of old age had been fearfully aggravated by the corroding influences of dire anguish and ineffable horror during the last few weeks; and those ravages were no longer disguised by the abundant use of cosmetics and succedaneous artifices. No rouge, nor pearl-powder, nor refreshing lotions mitigated or disguised the hideousness of the wretched woman's countenance! her skin was like wrinkled parchment upon her fleshless cheeks; her neck was scraggy and sallow even to loathsomeness;—her eyes seemed set in deep caverns. She had either lost, or else no longer chose to wear, her false teeth; and her mouth had therefore fallen in. Her nose was frightfully thin, so that her profile had all the angular sharpness of old age, unredeemed by any of that benevolent or placid expression which at such a time of life so often prevents the countenance from being revoltingly ugly. Her hair still retained the black dye where-with she had stained it at one of the latest toilettes which she performed at the villa: but inasmuch as it had grown somewhat during her imprisonment, it was all perfectly white for about a third of an inch at the roots—a circumstance that added to the hideousness of her appearance. Altogether she seemed the vilest and most loathsome wreck of humanity upon which Jocelyn Loftus ever set his eyes.

The moment he entered the cell he found her looks fixed upon him. She had been gazing at the door while it opened; and there was a species of reptile-like glistening in her sunken eyes. Loftus could not help shuddering as he thus encountered the looks of the wretched

woman. When he had last seen her, it was a fortnight back in the court of justice where she and her three accomplices were tried: but *then* she wore a bonnet and was closely veiled, so that he had not on that occasion observed the change which was taking place in her looks. Now he saw her without bonnet, without cap, and without veil,—her thin lank hair hanging down on her scraggy shoulders, and her lean shrivelled form wrapped in a gown which hung as loosely upon her as if in mockery wrapping a skeleton. He was shocked—he staggered back from the revolting spectacle: he could not conceal his disgust even if it had killed her upon the spot—and she not only noticed his manner but also comprehended the reason of it.

"You find me much changed, Mr. Loftus?"—she said; and her voice, no longer aided by the false teeth, was mumbling almost inarticulate.

"I did not expect to find you looking cheerful and happy," responded our hero, instantly recovering himself and speaking in that gentle tone which was consistent with the generosity of his character: for he would not willingly enhance the pain which he knew full well the wretched woman must experience. "Indeed, I should have been very sorry to find you looking as you were wont to do; because that would have bespoken a hardness of heart which under circumstances—"

"Ah, under circumstances!" she repeated quickly, and with greater strength of voice than before—as if the anguish of her feelings gave a power to her articulation. "Good God! and *what circumstances?* Death! death! The guillotine waiting for me—O horror! the guillotine!"—and clasping her hands, that were skinny and skeleton-like, she quivered and shook with a convulsive trembling from head to foot.

Jocelyn Loftus placed himself on a stool that was near the table, and said in a low and agitated voice, "Are you not prepared to die?"

"My God! can you put that question?" she exclaimed hysterically, and her eyes actually glared from their caverned sockets, which were of a bluish, almost livid tint. "I sent for you to say that you must save me!"

Loftus shook his head with a mournful slowness.

"Why do you do that?" she demanded abruptly and with a short gasp, as if her utterance were nearly choked: "why do you do that?"

"Can you not understand my meaning?" he said. "I was told that you were resigned—that you welcomed the visits of the good clergyman whom the authorities have allowed to penetrate to your cell. I had hoped that his pious ministrations had prepared you."

"Oh! if all he says be true, what can I hope, where shall I go?" cried the wretched woman, her attenuated form again shaken by a convulsive shudder. "He speaks to me of heaven and hell—of a heaven full of happiness and a hell formed of a burning lake—Ah! and I have seen it in my dreams too! Oh, the fierce flames, the molten fire, the raging sea of red hot brimstone!"

"But the minister has likewise told you that God is merciful, that there is hope of the penitent?" said Loftus.

"Yes: but what surety have I that crimes like mine can be forgiven? Murder! Oh, it is the foulest, the most horrible of all black deeds! The blood of the victim sticks to one: all I see is blood red! I behold you how through a crimson mist! It is horrible, horrible!" and the wretched woman covered her eyes with her fleshless hands, the veins of which were like knotted cords underneath the skin.

Jocelyn felt assured that her brain was touched, that her senses were impaired. He knew not what to say, or how to deal with the miserable creature under such circumstances.

"Well, what are you doing here?" she suddenly exclaimed, removing her hands from her shrivelled countenance! "unless you have come to save me. You have the power—I know you have! A word from you to the Syndicate will have the effect. Besides, you *must* save me. I cannot die—I am not prepared to die! I am old, and could not live long according to my natural span. Surely, surely it would be no great boon to accord me a year or two of existence which in the course of things would be mine? Let me be locked up in prison all the time. I do not ask to go out but I ask to *live*! Heavens, I can do no more harm in this world! There is no scope for mischief in this dreadful place. Look around!—a strong man in all his youthful vigour could not tear down those huge bars from the windows, nor break open that thick door, nor remove one single stone from the mass of masonry which makes these walls impenetrable as marble. Then, is it rational to fear that a poor, crushed, broken down, enfeebled wretch like me

could escape hence? No, no. Then take my life?—why?"

"Mrs. Ranger," answered Joe Loftus, "I beseech you to tranquil yourself, and to listen to me. This afternoon a message was left by the Protestant clergyman at the hotel where I am staying to the effect that you wished to see me only for a few moments. I was not within at the time: I did not return to Hotel until an hour ago. It was then nine o'clock. I could not disregard the prayer of a fellow-creature whose hours in this world are numbered——"

"But why enter into such particulars demanded Mrs. Ranger impatiently. "These things are trivial—Oh! trivial a degree, in comparison with the immense importance of my position. Let us talk then, only on what can be done to save me."

"I pray you to listen," continued Loftus, impressively. "I was about to inform you that I went to the principal Syndic to beseech a written order to visit you at once. I saw him—and he complied with my request. I asked him if——"

"If what?" demanded the wretched woman with almost frenzied impatience for she now guessed what was coming.

"I asked him, I say, whether there was any intention to commute your sentence," continued Loftus, with deepening solemnity of tone, "and he declared that the law must take its course."

"He did not!—it is false!" exclaimed Mrs. Ranger, her features convulsing most hideously with a sort of frenzied rage as she spoke. "You only say this to avoid taking any farther trouble in my behalf. You want to see me perish dreadfully on the scaffold! It is you who have done it all. Had you never come to Geneva to interfere with my plans, I should not have been led into the circumstances which have made me what I am and have placed me here. Cruel and heartless that you are—pitiless and implacable—it is *you* who have hunted me to the very death!"

"Mrs. Ranger," answered Loftus, in a mournful tone, "I cannot be angry with one in your condition. But you must recollect that you prepared all this sad destiny for yourself. Wherefore did you ever embark in a course which was likely to conduct you, you knew not whither. But God forbid that I should reproach you now! Great as your sins have been, your punishment is also great—great enough indeed, I hope, to be an atonement—but it is my duty to assure you that with the

affairs of earth you have no farther concern."

"Oh! forgive me, forgive me, my dear young man, if I said anything to offend you. I did not mean it! But there are moments when I know not what I say or do:—my brain seems to be on fire—it is in a dreadful whirl! But tell me, tell me, that you will yet save me? Think of the horrors of such a death. My God! I shall go wild if I dare contemplate it. Mr. Loftus, you *must* save me—I cannot die! If they come to take me, I will scratch—I will fly at the ruffian-men like a tiger-cat. Oh! I will do a mischief!"—and she laughed with a horrible frenzy.

"Do you not think that I had better go and fetch the clergyman to you once more?" asked Loftus, cruelly bewildered by this awful scene.

"No: he is of no use to me now," was the wretched woman's quick response: then she paused—slowly bent down her eyes—and appeared to reflect profoundly, "Many, many years ago," she at length said,—and now she spoke in a strangely altered voice—a voice in which there was a low and mournful pathos,—“a sweet little girl was gambolling and skipping about in a beautiful garden full of fruits and flowers. Let us contemplate that dear innocent child when she was about five or six years old. What blushing roses were upon her cheeks! what lily-purity upon her brow! Her dark brown hair flowed in myriads of clusters over her white neck and shoulders. What joy danced in her sunny eyes! What silver pearls of mirth rolled forth from her red lips! and how glancingly did her tiny feet trip over the lawn, along the gravel walks, and amidst the parterres of flowers! And that little child, so gay, so innocent, so good, was a fond mother's darling. The mother was a widow; and this child was her treasure and her comfort. Behold that dear kind mother coming forth from the picturesque cottage to which the garden belongs; and how that child bounds towards her! The butterfly wandering from flower to flower is not more happy than this young child. The melody of birds in the trees of that garden is not more delicious than the music of the child's mirth as its mother receives it with open arms. Oh! what a blissful scene—innocence in its own appropriate paradise! Mr. Loftus, it is a picture of my own earliest years I am giving you. That child was myself!"

As she thus spoke, Mrs. Ranger raised her eyes in a melancholy—Oh! so melancholy a manner towards Jocelyn Loftus, that his heart swelled with emotions, and he felt that the tears were trickling down his cheeks. He saw not the hideous hag before him, lean, wrinkled, and stricken by all the searing woes of age, crime and calamity; he saw not the cold cheerless dungeon, with its massive bars, its huge door, its impenetrable walls, its stone pavement, its vaulted roof, and its rough meagre furniture; but so vividly had the picture which the woman drew been impressed upon his mind, that he beheld only that sweet little innocent child she had delineated in so strangely touching a manner; and that garden-scene with the picturesque cottage, all of which appeared a romantic and lovely reality to his mind's eye.

"But the scene changes," she went on to say, in a deeper mournfulness of voice: "a dozen years have passed—and in a sumptuously-furnished apartment a beautiful young creature of seventeen or eighteen reclines upon a sofa. Yes—she is dazzlingly beautiful. All the evidences of wealth and luxury are about her person and in that apartment. Her dress is splendid: diamonds are upon her hair—pearls encircle her neck—pearls also hang over her naked bosom—and the richest bracelets set off her snow white arms. The door opens: a powdered lacquy enters to ask at what hour this lady will have the carriage. She gives him the required answer. Soon afterwards an elegant French lady's maid appears to bring costly stuffs, lace veils, silks and satins, for the lady's inspection. Milliners and drapers, mercers and jewellers, send their goods or await her orders. One of the most eminent artists of the day comes to receive instructions relative to her portrait. Thus the forenoon is disposed of. Then comes a handsome man in the prime of life—tall, portly, and with a noble bearing. He is one of the proudest peers of England; and this charming creature is his mistress. He is infatuated with her: he worships, he adores her—but he is already married and has a large family, or he would make her his wife. Nevertheless, he testifies his affection by all possible means: his wealth is immense, and he is never wearied of expending his gold to surround his loved one with all the luxuries and elegancies of life—not merely to gratify her slightest whims, but even to anticipate them. He has placed her in a splendid mansion, given her carriages and

servants, and heaped upon her all the bounties, the extravagances, and the profusions which the most refined luxury or the stateliest pomp could possibly require. But she does not love him in return. She never loved him. For her fall from innocence there is not even the apology of the heart's affection. She was dazzled only by his lofty rank, his boundless wealth, and the golden promises he made her. Thoughtless and giddy, notwithstanding the admirable training which she had received under a fond mother's care, she preferred to be a proud peer's mistress rather than a poor man's bride. She was dwelling in the country when he spoke to her of the grandeur of the metropolis: the simple enjoyments of a rural life seemed monotonous to her in comparison with the glowing pleasures associated with the mere name of London. Dazzled and intoxicated by all that was told her and all that she dreamt—excited and enchanted by the words that he spoke and the pictures her imagination drew—she had fallen! Yes—she had fled from her once happy home: and behold her now, the great lord's mistress! But she loved him not. Soon, however, she encountered a young man for whom she conceived a passion; and she intrigued with him. One day her noble admirer discovered her infidelity. Immense as his love had been, proportionately implacable was his vengeance now. He dispossessed her of everything he had bestowed upon her. In his rage he tore the jewels from her person, and trampled them under his foot: he then turned her forth from the splendid mansion where he had lodged her:—and all in a moment she found herself stripped of every symbol of wealth, flung down from the pinnacle of prosperity, and in the street, homeless and friendless, with but a few guineas in her pocket. Well-nigh broken hearted, she hastened to the young man whom she loved, and who had been, as it were, the cause of her downfall. But that very morning he had led a bride to the altar, and was away into the country to spend the honeymoon. What was the young creature to do now? She was not so thoroughly depraved as to be inaccessible to some of those tender whisperings which the voice of youthful memories breathes upward from the soul in moments such as that. Thoughts of a once happy home came vividly back to her recollection: and to her mind's eye arose the sweet picture of rural simplicity—the garden with its verdure, its gravel-walks, its parterres of flowers; and its lawn in front

of the picturesque cottage. Aye, and thought also of the fond flanking mo whom she had so cruelly abandoned—widowed mother whose joy, and darling treasure she had been. Back, back to the scene of her childhood—that cherished spot that home in a far country! But would it look home to again? would the door open to receive her? would the widowed mother's arms be unfolded to welcome her? Yes, yes she at least had that hope! It was a splendid carriage which had borne her away from the cottage to the metropolis: it was the stage coach now which took the fugitive back again. Pillowed on the breast of an adoring lover, and she travelled away from that cottage alone inside the cheerful public vehicle did she retrace her way thither. It was night when she was set down in the road, at the nearest point to the house. She had to walk a mile to reach it. The night was dark: it was the winter season: and the wind sighed among the skeleton branches of the trees like the voices of the dead. Those sounds seemed full of weird portents to her: and she could hear her heart beat forcibly. Still she went on—and at length the cottage was reached. A light—a solitary light—was shining from a window: it was her mother's chamber. Oh! if she were ill! Heavens! the thought was intolerable and the unhappy young creature, lean against the garden fence for support. At length she opened the gate and went in. Ah! it was no longer in innocence that she trod that ground where the steps of her childhood had played so glancingly along the gravel walks and amidst the parterres of flowers. It was in guilt, in shame, and in degradation that with feet as heavy as lead she dragged herself to the front door. She knocked—it was opened—and the old servant, who had been for years in the place, uttered an ejaculation so wild and strange that it struck dismay for an instant to the guilty young creature's heart. But the next moment, unable to bear the agonies of suspense, she flew up-stairs—rushed into her mother's chamber—and then stood suddenly transfixed in direst horror at the spectacle which met her view. Dim and sickly was the light which burnt in the room; and an old woman was creeping about the bed, performing the last offices of a sick-nurse. But on that bed—O God! was stretched the lifeless corpse of the broken-hearted mother! and the guilty daughter suddenly gave vent to a thrilling shriek of ineffable anguish—a shriek that rang through floor

and ceiling, wall and roof, and pierced the brains of those who heard it. Then she staggered forward a few steps, reeled half round and fell heavily."

Here Mrs. Ranger paused again: and covering her face with her withered hands, she sobbed low, but with an inward convulsiveness that denoted a mortal anguish. She had narrated this second chapter in her own sad history—for it *was* her own tale she was telling—with a mournful evenness and painful continuity of tone,—not seeming exactly to address herself to Loftus, nor to have the deliberate intent of unveiling to him the secrets of her earlier life, but rather giving audible expression to the train of recollections which circumstances had now so vividly conjured up. But he listened with the deepest, deepest interest; for it was a tale which no man could hear unmoved. The tears even trickled down his cheeks, and his heart swelled with emotion; for in imagination he saw every feature, every detail, every incident of the woman's history as plainly as if it were being enacted upon a theatre, and he a spectator of the whole drama.

"Years passed away," continued Mrs. Ranger, resuming her audible musings after a deep silence of several minutes; "and during that period many were the vicissitudes which the guilty daughter had known. She had seen the remains of her mother—that mother whom her crime had murdered—deposited in the church-yard. She had seen the damp clay heaped up over the coffin: some time afterwards she had revisited the spot and had seen the grass growing upon the grave. But whenever in the deep winter's night she lay awake and heard the winds moaning, or sighing, or raving without, she thought how cold, Oh! how cold that poor mother must be slumbering in her grave. She thought how the rude blasts would bowl, and sweep in fury, stern and pitiless, bleak and chill, over the green sward and amid the tombstones in that lone churchyard. It was to avoid such thoughts as these that she plunged headlong into dissipation. She became the mistress of one man—then the mistress of another; sometimes being heartlessly deserted or thrust off by him to whom she surrendered herself—at other times being detected in intrigue elsewhere, and discarded with bitterest reproaches—perhaps with blows. Sometimes she revelled in luxury—at others she was the occupant of a garret: now sitting down to a sumptuously-spread table—and now pledging the last article of her clothing for

the wherewith to obtain a morsel of food. At length, when living for a brief interval in a somewhat more respectable manner, but upon the gold which she had received as the wages of infamy, she was courted by a worthy man in tolerable circumstances. His name was Ranger. She married him. He thought he was espousing a respectable widow, and he was confiding, indulgent, and happy. Three or four years thus passed; and she endeavoured to avoid those courses which had given her so many, many bitter experiences. But temptation came again. She was still young—still handsome; and in an evil moment she listened to the dishonourable suit of a young nobleman whom chance threw in her way. For a brief period this intrigue was carried on without the knowledge of the husband; but at length his suspicion was awakened by something he heard. For he obtained a clue to the former character of his wife: he was thus led to make inquiries, and found to his horror and dismay that it was the veriest profligate whom he had espoused! The cast-off mistress of many men—the refuse of lovers too numerous to be easily remembered—the guilty thing whose crimes had broken her mother's heart and sent that fond parent in misery and anguish to a premature grave,—such was the woman whom a respectable man in all trustfulness had taken to his heart, placed at the head of his household, and honoured with his confidence and his love! The exposure was terrific: and expelled, penniless, and friendless from the house of an outraged husband, the wretched creature found herself deserted also by the heartless noble whose fatal love had thus consummated her ruin. Poor Ranger died of a broken heart—another of her victims! But not one single shilling did he leave her in his will. It is true that her name was mentioned there—but in terms of horror and of loathing—yea, and with curses also!"

Here the condemned woman paused again. This time she covered not her face with her hands, but clasped them together, agitating them convulsively—shaking her head with nervous quickness, and giving vent to bitter lamentations expressive of the anguished memories which thus surged up into her almost frenzied brain. Jocelyn Loftus wept now. He no longer beheld before him either the cherub-child disporting in the garden of flowers, nor the betrayed and deluded girl returning home in penitence and sorrow to crave a parent's forgiveness. But the

saw before him an inveterate profligate—a vile, dissolute woman—the hideous personification of every gross immorality—a wretch for whom early experiences had no salutary warnings, and who was fitted only to betray all love, all confidence, and break all affectionate hearts. He gazed upon her with a sort of mournful sternness: but she heeded him not—and after another long pause concluded her narrative in these terms:—

"Years and years have passed since Ranger died: and varied and chequered has been the existence of her whom he discarded and who was left behind him. Through all kinds of profligacy has she dragged herself—through a morass of vices, pollutions, and infamies has she floundered on—dissolute in respect to herself so long as the fire of her passions lasted and she could find lovers to share in her obscene pleasure. But such a course made her prematurely old; and as dissipation showed its fearful ravages, she became an object for loathing and disgust, instead of for admiration and love. The healthful bloom faded from her cheeks—her hair, once so redundant in its glorious beauty, grew lank and thin—her teeth fell out—her once splendid bust had become shrivelled into hideousness—her form wasted into a mere collection of bones covered by a wrinkled and sallow skin. Farewell then to all the pleasures of voluptuous delight and sensual joy for her!—and it was not the least of the punishments which she endured that her desires outlived in fevered frenzy the possibility of gratifying them. But to live—what was she to do for the means of subsistence? Having been the daughter of crimes herself, she now became the mother of iniquity. Vile in its hypocrisies as had been her heart, so vile in its artificialities was her person now rendered. Cosmetics and all the falsities of the toilette, still made her presentable, if no longer loveable; and she tutored herself to adopt an air and a demeanour suited to her new avocation. Deeply versed in intrigue, but no longer able to intrigue for herself, she intrigued for others. Assuming the position of a respectable widow, she secretly became a procuress of the vilest description. Oh! if all the damsels whom she has inveigled into her meshes and betrayed to their ruin, could now stand forward and bear witness against her—if all the young virgins whom she has enticed beneath her roof and sold to the polluting embrace of lustful aristocrats and the hoary dignitaries of the Church, could now gather here

and speak out—and if the tomb could send up all the victims whom her detestable machinations have helped in consigning to it, how many broken hearts would be arrayed as terrible accusers against her! Oh! the vilest brothels—the darkest dens of infamy—have seen no wrongs and beheld no injuries inflicted upon credulous damsels, more flagrant than those wrongs and those injuries which she has perpetrated in her time. Ah! was it possible that such a career could glide on tranquilly until the end?—was it natural that a life pursuing its course amidst such matchless infamies, could terminate in a peaceful death-bed and in an honoured grave? No, no. I deserve it all! Yes, the Destroyer is approaching! He comes—he comes—arrayed in more than usual terrors: he has put on all his hideousness! The grim skeleton is surrounded by every horror known beyond the grave!"

While giving utterance to these last words, the wretched woman started from the pallet—drew herself upright—extended her long lank hands towards one corner of the cell—and fixed her glaring eyes in the same direction, as if she beheld some horrible object stationed there. Loftus likewise rose from his seat, and stepped back a pace or two as he gazed upon the doomed being with indescribable loathing and horror. He could scarcely feel any further pity on her behalf: such shocking revelations had gushed forth from her lips, like a stream of fetid putrid feculence, that he could scarcely persuade himself he beheld before him a being possessed of a human heart. She seemed like a fiend in female shape.

"Oh, yes—the reality of my doom is now before me!" she cried in tones of rending anguish. "The scaffold awaits me—the guillotine is raised. But who are you?" she suddenly demanded, her wildly glaring eyes now resting upon Loftus. "Ah! I remember:"—and she sank back to a sitting posture upon the bed again. "I have been giving vent to all the memories which arose in my brain," she continued, in a more subdued and deliberate manner; "and you have heard, Mr. Loftus, some shocking things. But think you not that I have been punished enough? Picture to yourself all that I have endured since that dreadful night when you and Baron Bergami seized upon me in my own chamber at the Villa, and the terrible sound of *Murderess* rang in my ears!"

"Mrs. Ranger," said our hero, in a low and solemn voice, "I can only repeat the—

words which I uttered ere now. You have no farther concern with the affairs of this life. All the deeds of your past existence have just been revealed to my ears: perhaps this outpouring of confessions may have somewhat relieved your soul? Therefore do I beseech you, fix your thoughts only upon that solemn object which should now prove all-engrossing——"

"What!" shrieked forth the wretched woman in the wildness of her despair; you bid me abandon all hope? No, no—I cannot resign myself thus to die! You must save me—you must save me!"

Loftus shook his head with slow solemnity, saying, "For the last time am I compelled to assure you that you have no hope. And now farewell."

"Stop one moment!" exclaimed the doomed creature: "I wish to ask you a few questions. Oh! do remain but another minute or two—and I will be calm—I will be calm!" she added with a visible endeavour to subdue her horrified feelings: but she shuddered all over as if an ice-blast had poured in upon her.

"Speak then—for I must leave you now, so that the clergyman may return."

"Tell me, Mr. Loftus, is not my name mentioned with curses and execrations out-of-doors?" she asked. "Will there not be an immense crowd to-morrow?"—and again she shuddered visibly. "Shall I be ill-treated on any way to—to—"

"I think not—indeed I am certain you have nothing to fear on that head. The police-officers will protect you."

"My God, my God! And those three men—are they to die also? will they be pardoned?"

"No: there is not the slightest chance of that."

"And Dr. Maravelli—what has become of him?" asked Mrs. Ranger, forcing herself to maintain a calmness which was nevertheless horrible to contemplate, because it was like the surface of ice upon a river in the depths of whose waters hideous monsters and reptiles lurk and agitate.

"Maravelli is expelled from the Genevese territory," replied Jocelyn. "There was nothing against him beyond having given his assistance in an illegal manner at the birth of a child; and I had promised to do my best to save him from any serious entanglement with the law."

"And why did you promise him that?" demanded Mrs. Ranger eagerly.

"Because to a considerable extent he aided some of my plans," replied Loftus. "This I explained to the authorities, and

interceded for him. They accordingly considered that justice would be satisfied by his expatriation."

"And will justice then be satisfied with nothing short of *my* death?" asked Mrs. Ranger. "Can you not—will you not intercede for me?"

"It is useless," returned Jocelyn.

"But do you wish me dead? is it your desire to hurry me to the scaffold? do you thirst for my blood?" she demanded with passionate vehemence.

"Heaven forbid!" was the quick reply. "But I am powerless in the matter. Did it rest with me, he added solemnly, "I should conceive that justice would be satisfied and outraged society should be content with dooming you to imprisonment for the remainder of your life. Indeed that you may not carry with you to the grave a false sentiment relative to my feelings, I do not hesitate to declare that I am averse to the punishment of death altogether."

"Then, in the name of God, do something to save me—I conjure you to do something to save me!"—and Mrs. Ranger fell upon her knees at his feet, looking up towards his countenance and raising her clasped hands.

"Rise, Mrs. Ranger—rise," he said, in an earnest voice: "for I can allow no human being to kneel to me. Were I a king I would not permit it! Rise, therefore, and I speak another word."

"To obey you I do it," she said slowly raising herself up, and standing before him in all the wretchedness of her physical ugliness and her moral degradation.

"There! you see I am obedient. Now

"Mrs. Ranger, I solemnly assure that I appealed to the Syndics on your behalf," continued Jocelyn. "I represented that the Princess herself, deeply as you had injured her, craved not your life—that Baron Bargami, for whose heart the murderous blow was destined, sought not your death."

"And what was the result?" asked the wretched woman, with an agonized feverishness of impatience.

"There is no hope," returned Jocelyn solemnly. "The law will take its course."

Mrs. Ranger sank back once more upon the pallet. She seemed confounded: all hope was now evidently crushed within her. She said not a word; and it almost appeared as if the bitterness of death were at this instant passing away. Some portion of her natural strength

appeared to revive again; and half suppressing a convulsive gasp, she said, "Now do I know the worst. I am astonished that even for a single moment I could have cherished the idea that mercy would be shown me."

Then there was a pause of several minutes, during which the unhappy woman appeared to be looking inwardly, communing with herself.

Jocelyn was most anxious to get away: the scene had altogether been painful beyond description; and though he did not choose to consult his watch, because it would be far too cruelly significant a hint for *her* how time was passing, yet he could tolerably well conjecture that nearly two hours must have elapsed from the moment he entered that cell. but he still experienced enough compassion for the miserable woman, and at all events possessed feelings of too delicate and considerate a nature, to hasten away at a moment when such a proceeding would disturb the solemn meditation in which she was engaged.

"Yes—I have now abandoned all hope" said Mrs. Ranger, again breaking silence. "But tell me—for those who come near me in this dreadful dungeon will give me no information relative to aught that is passing without—tell me, I say, how fares it with those unhappy girls. Agatha and Julia? God knows I did not mean to cause their sister's death. Alas, poor Emma!"

"Sad and sorrowful is the lesson which the fate of those three young women teaches," answered Loftus. "One, as you know, already lies in a premature grave—and the other two——"

"Speak—what of them?" demanded Mrs. Ranger, seeing that he hesitated. "Tell me everything. Methinks I shall die more easily if I know the worst in every respect; because my feelings must be relieved from all suspense. Speak then."

"Yes—for the reason you have set forth I will answer your question," rejoined Loftus. "Know then, that Agatha and Julia are the inmates of a mad-house: their senses have abandoned them for ever!"

"O God! this is horrible—and yet it is better than death! Mr. Loftus, I am calm now: my soul is nerved to meet my doom. Farewell!"

"Farewell—and may heaven have mercy upon you!"

In a few moments the door opened to give Jocelyn Loftus egress from the cell of the doomed woman. The turnkey and the

Protestant minister were walking together in the passage; and as our hero issued forth from the dungeon, the reverend pastor went in to give the last consolations of religion to Mrs. Ranger.

As our hero crossed the threshold of the prison-gate again and stepped into the street, the church clocks proclaimed the hour of midnight: but the moment the iron tongue of the huge bells in the towers had ceased to beat the air with their deep metallic notes, a smaller bell with sombre tone took up the sound. This was rung by a watchman passing up the street in which the prison was situated; and when he had made his bell clang forth half-a-dozen consecutive strokes, he said in a loud but lugubrious voice, "Past midnight! Good people all, pray for the souls of those who are to die in a few hours!"

Jocelyn shuddered: and quickening his pace, he returned to the *Hotel Royal*, where he had taken up his quarters since the terrible tragedy at Maravelli's.

CHAPTER CLXXXII.

THE GUILLOTINE.

IT was eleven o'clock in the forenoon; and brightly shone the sun in a heaven of unclouded azure. Lake Lemano never seemed more beautiful, nor the Alpine scenery in the distance more sublimely grand. It was a day fitted only for universal rejoicing, and to serve as a holiday to commemorate some happy event. But though the streets of Geneva were crowded to excess, and multitudes were pouring in from all the surrounding districts, yet was it no festive occasion. For there—in the principal square of the republican city—stood a sinister object; and the golden beams of the cloudless sun were reflected in the hideous axe of the guillotine!

Yes—an immense crowd was collected: and the windows, balconies, and roofs of all the dwellings looking upon the spot were put into requisition by the anxious spectators. Pity was it that so many, many young damsels, wearing the picturesque attire of the rural districts or the mountain heights in the neighbourhood, should have donned their Sunday raiment for such an occasion; but so it was! The pretty caps, white as the snow upon the Alpine summits in the distance, and resting upon hair arranged in heavy masses or else in beauteous braids—those boddices laced with elegant—

imprisoning busts modelled in the most voluptuous style of woman's symmetry—those gracefully flowing petticoats, leaving so much of the well-shaped legs displayed,—all assuredly set off the charms of the Genevese damsels to their utmost advantage: but, Ah! were these damsels gathered in that market place now for the mere purpose of being seen and admired? No: on this occasion they scarcely thought of themselves. They had put on their Sunday raiment because it was their habit to do so when stealing a day from their usual avocations, and when congregating in great numbers. But all their thoughts—all their ideas—all their interest, in short, seemed absorbed in the legal tragedy that was about to take place.

There were not many troops present: the people of Geneva, having republican institutions, and governing themselves, are in the habit of preserving order without the coercion and repression of large military and constabulary forces. Still there were a few soldiers and mounted gendarmes, for the purpose of keeping the space about the scaffold clear, and maintaining a pathway amidst the dense mass for the passage of the vehicle that was expected.

The behaviour of the multitude was most decorous, forming a strange contrast with that of the crowds which assemble at the Old Bailey in London to witness the execution of a criminal. There—at Geneva—no ribald jests were heard, no practical jokes were played: there was no loud, coarse laughing—no disgraceful quarrelling—none of those indecencies and obscenities which are enacted on an execution-morning around the drop in front of Newgate. True, the same morbid feeling of curiosity which serves to gather the crowd in the Old Bailey, had now congregated these masses in the market-place at Geneva; but there the similitude ceased. For around the Genevese guillotine the bearing of the populace was as solemn and as respectful as if those gathered masses had come to assist at a funeral. Upon every countenance might be seen an expression of mingled awe, and terror, and grief: and any remarks that were made were uttered in subdued whispers, as if those who spoke felt that they were in the presence of the dead!

But let us turn our attention to the front of the prison, which establishment was situated at some little distance from the great square. At the door of that gloomy gaol stood a rude, uncouth-looking vehicle, like a common cart, drawn by two horses. Inside four coffins were

placed. An escort of gendarmes was in attendance. A little after eleven the prison-door was thrown open; and the three male criminals—Kobolt, Hernani, and Walden—came forth, accompanied by the Catholic priest who had all along been appointed to minister unto them. They were evidently much cast down, although to the best of their power they strove to maintain a bold front. Kobolt was the least depressed of the three; but he was a man of more dogged resolution and decided character than his comrades. On ascending the cart they all three gave signs of a cold horror stealing upon them, as they beheld their coffins: and for a moment the expression which swept over Hernani's and Walden's features was full of anguish. Kobolt hastened to seat himself on the edge of the vehicle in such a way that the priest might stand between him and the piled-up coffins.

No manifestation of feeling broke forth from the crowd assembled in front of the prison; there were neither hootings nor yellings,—but on the other hand there were no expressions of compassion. The desperate characters of the three criminals had so fully transpired on the occasion of their trial, that their fate was not likely to enlist much sympathy in their favour.

Again the prison-door opens,—and now all eyes are turned upon the wretched object who comes forth. It is Mrs. Ranger. Hideous as she already was when Loftus saw her a few hours back, yet more awful still was the change which had since taken place in her appearance. No conception of the most horrible witch that ever brewed her hell-broth in hollow rock or gloomy cavern, could outvie the revolting aspect of the doomed woman. It was evident she was exerting all her courage for this awful occasion—evident also that she had worked herself thus up to a pitch of energy which would give way with the least untoward incident. On issuing forth from the gaol, she swept her eyes around with a quick glance of apprehension, as if fearful of receiving ill-treatment from the multitude; and then the very next moment she seemed appalled by the silence so deep, so ominous, which prevailed. Not a murmur was heard, not a syllable was breathed, even in the lowest whisper, as the turnkeys helped her up in to the cart. She threw a shuddering look upon the coffins: and it was only with an almost preterhuman effort that she prevented herself from giving vent to her anguish by one loud, long, and terrific shriek.

mournful lamentations which during the last minute or two they had been putting forth.

Two men now ascended the platform of the guillotine. These were the executioner and his assistant. Stationing themselves near the plank, they waited for the gendarmes to bring them up the first individual who was to suffer. This was Mrs. Ranger. The authorities had deemed that it would be more merciful to put her out of her misery as speedily as possible, rather than suffer her to be a spectatrix of the decapitation of her companions first. Hernani wished her good-bye, and extended his hand. It was a good feeling which, at such a moment, prompted such a man thus to separate in peace from the woman who might almost be regarded as the authoress of his own calamity, inasmuch as it was she who had bribed him and his accomplices to commit the crime for which they were all about to suffer. But it was only with a mechanical movement that she took the outstretched hand: for her senses were now all paralyzed by the horror of consternation and dismay. Kobolt and Walden followed Hernani's example: their hands were also shaken for a moment, but in the same mechanical, unconscious manner;—and then Mrs. Ranger was conducted by two gendarmes up the steps of the guillotine, the Protestant minister bearing her company.

Words have no power to convey the state of mind which this miserable woman experienced now, as she stood upon the threshold of another world: but we can scarcely say *experienced*, because she had no power of comprehending the condition of her own feelings. She seemed to be walking in a dream—yet a dream so horrible, so full of consternation, so fraught with utter dismay, that it was accompanied with the most poignant of agonies. The executioner and his assistant took her by the arms and placed her against the plank, which they had raised to a vertical position: and they proceeded to fasten her to it. Now she became convulsed with quick gaspings; and the Protestant minister, who was nigh, breathed a prayer in her ears. But it was as if he stood upon the sea-shore preaching to the waves when roaring in the rage of the tempest: for a similar storm was in her brain—and she heard him not. Suddenly, however, she gave a convulsive start—reapt her eyes wildly around—and in that quick lightning glance embraced the crowd, the tall spars in front of her and all the principal features of the scene.

"Just heaven! it is no dream then? It is a reality!" she cried forth in a rending tone: and then, after a single moment's pause, there thrilled from her lips a shriek as wild, as penetrating, as fully fraught with an ineffable agony, as that which between thirty and forty years ago she had given when standing by the side of her mother's corpse.

But this shriek which she sent forth now on the scaffold of the guillotine in the great square of Geneva, was one such as had never been heard before—a scream which those who did hear, have never since forgotten, and which has often rung again and again in imagination through their brains. Oh! it was a fearful, fearful thing to be present *there* and hear that death-note of a human being's wild and excruciating terror, going up from the platform of the ghastly engine of destruction into the air all golden with the effulgence of the glorious sun!—it was a dread and a shocking thing that such a wail should pierce the noon-tide air on such a day, while nature was smiling, and happy, and joyous all around!

But what had this to do with the march of what is called human justice and the execution of man's bloodthirsty law? Having given vent to that agonizing scream, the wretched woman fell into an immediate stupor; and though she was still alive, yet all consciousness had abandoned her. Being strapped to the plank, she was lowered upon it into to a horizontal position, so that her head was received in the semi-circular indentation in the lower half of the stocks: the upper half was instantaneously let down, and her neck was now held shut in the hole, her head hanging out convenient for the stroke of the hatchet. And *that* was soon given! The executioner loosened the string from the peg—down fell the axe with a whirring noise—the blow was struck—the head was severed—and with a great gush of blood it fell into the basket beneath!

To unstrap the trunk, hurry it away to its coffin in a cart, and carry the severed head thither, also, was the work of but a couple of minutes. Then one after another did the three "fishers of men" ascend the scaffold, and suffer death in the presence of the awe-stricken multitude.

CHAPTER CLXXXIII.

VALENTINE AND VENETIA.

RETURN we once more to Carlton House.

It was about mid-day; and Lady Sackville had just descended from her boudoir to the drawing-room of her suite of apartments, when a domestic entered to state that Sir Valentine Malvern requested an interview with her ladyship, and that he hoped it would be accorded him. Venetia at once desired that he might be admitted: and in a few minutes the young baronet was ushered into the drawing room.

"I gave you a special invitation to call upon me," said Venetia, extending her hand with graceful affability towards him; "and yet you send in a message as if you thought that there was some difficulty in obtaining access to me."

"It is but mid-day," answered Sir Valentine—"full two hours earlier than the proper time for paying visits of ceremony or courtesy—but, as it appeared to me, the most suitable hour for making a call on a matter of business."

"A matter of business?" echoed Venetia, with a sweet smile; "I am at a loss to conceive how there can be any business between us. But in any case you are welcome. As for the propriety of the hour, you are quite right, Sir, Valentine: this is just that disagreeable part of the day when there is little or nothing to do, and it is difficult to know how to amuse one's self."

"A little embroidery, or tambour-work, or drawing?" suggested Sir Valentine; but he spoke in a somewhat melancholy manner, and also with a partial embarrassment amounting to constraint.

"I dislike such occupations," answered Venetia. "I was always of indolent habits. I used once to be much addicted to novel-reading: but latterly I have given it up. I find that there are so very, very few books in which the world is depicted truly. It was all very well when I was accustomed to judge the world entirely by the book I read: *then* they had an extraordinary charm for me."

"And yet your ladyship has read other books besides novels?" said Valentine, gazing upon her with a sort of mournful interest.

"Yes, assuredly," she replied again smiling with all her wonted sweetness. "Does not the world call me accomplished? Well, and without vanity I may say that so I am, considering how little it requires to render a lady accomplished in

high life. For instance, I have read all our best poets; and possessing a memory of great power—this too I may say without vanity, because memory is a gift—I can repeat the finest and most striking passage of these works. Then I can draw when I choose. Here," she continued, rising from the sofa on which she was seated, and approaching a table where she opened a splendid portfolio: "these are my specimens. See—here are drawings in chalk and drawings in pencil; and here are designs in water-colours. Most of these I did when at Acacia Cottage, before I came to Carlton House; but since I have been here I have had no time for drawing—or rather, perhaps no inclination."

"They are very beautiful," said Valentine, who had followed Lady Sackville to the table. "I should not think of flattering you for a moment," he continued: "but I myself am very fond of drawing; and I have no hesitation in pronouncing these specimens to exhibit a great proficiency. And yet they bear every indication of a taste rapidly cultivated and not gradually developed—a taste, so to speak, which put forth all its powers of a sudden, and grappled with difficult subjects before it passed entirely through the usual length of training."

"You are right, Sir Valentine," answered Venetia: and now I saw that you are really no flatterer but at the same time an excellent judge. Well then, for my other accomplishments—I am considered a tolerably good musician—quite good enough to compete with any lady who sits down to her piano on her harp either for her own recreation or that of her friends, at a select party. Then, as for my conversation, when you and I come to know more of each other you will be able to judge me on that score."

"And do you think," asked Sir Valentine surveying her with a singular expression, "that we shall know more of each other? Do you wish it?"

"Did I not give you a pressing invitation to call?" asked Venetia; then resuming her seat on the sofa, while the young Baronet returned to the chair, which he had taken near her, she said in a somewhat more serious tone. "But tell me, Sir Valentine, what you meant ere now by saying that your visit was of a business character? Perhaps the answer will explain wherefore I behold a certain constraint in your manner."